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PLAIN (WELL, NOT JUST PLAIN) FUN:

THE POTENTIAL FOR HUMOR IN THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY "ONE-SHOT LECTURE"

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Education Bibliographer/ Reference Librarian
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June 1985

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Abstract

This essay looks at ways in which humor can be used to teach library skills in academic libraries. It discusses both the motivational and pedagogical value of humor as it is discussed in educational literature. Many examples are used to illustrate ways in which these principles can be applied in the library setting. Suggestions for effective integration of humor into the library lecture are also offered.

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PLAIN (WELL, NOT JUST PLAIN) FUN: THE POTENTIAL FOR HUMOR IN THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY "ONE-SHOT LECTURE" [1]

Have you ever been tempted to use a diagram of a rat's maze to illustrate the importance of a library research strategy? Probably not. I have. In fact, if I taught basic library research, I would. Why? Well, for several reasons.

First, the image captures the essence of how many students feel about having to use libraries. They feel like helpless creatures unprepared for the task ahead. They are forced to undertake this unpleasant, seemingly trivial journey before they can even get to the second, ultimate unknown -- the writing of a research paper. The library is a confusing array of signs, jargon, policies, and shelves with an organization known only to survivors who have already mastered the maze. To students, we represent the creators and caretakers of the maze. By depicting the library as a maze, we show that we can empathize with students' feelings and that we are there, not to put up barriers, but to expedite their journey through the maze. Through the use of humor, we can build bridges between ourselves and our students and thereby establish the kind of rapport that is so vital to good teaching. [2] We can present

ourselves as facilitators of student learning.[3]

Second, as we all know from comic strips and political cartoons, the simplified pictorial expression of how we feel allows us to confront our perspective head-on and to work with those feelings. Once students identify with the picture, that identification can be used to change attitudes. As we draw their attention away from the overall maze to the relatively clear path (preferably several alternate paths) leading to the cheese (success), we are actually pointing out that they are not helpless rats -- they can use a strategy to efficiently and effectively get to that cheese. We give students an immediate sense of power over the situation. Overcoming students' poor self-image is the essential first step in getting them to learn.[4] With this introduction, we lead students to the punch-line -- why are they here, at this library lecture? They are here to learn the ins and outs of the maze so they don't waste their time and energy discovering them by trial and error as rats do. Having a very relevant reason for a lecture does wonders for motivation![5]

At this point in the presentation of our maze allegory, we may need to switch gears. Some students may see this as a trite, cute, even condescending way to introduce library research techniques. If so, we would point out that we have very definite, serious reasons for portraying library research as a maze. We can draw their attention away from the bright, breezy path and back to the

pitfalls and barriers that can impede their progress.[6] The warnings we want to share with students can be presented in a non-threatening, facilitating context rather than as a humorless, affronting list of do's and don'ts. A little anxiety over possible mistakes in the library research process motivates students to learn that process.[7] It has stimulated students' interest in and attention to the educational message to follow.[8] Our humorous analogy has thereby set the stage for the primary content of the course, i.e. the clarification of the steps involved in a successful trek through the library research maze.

THE FUNCTIONS OF HUMOR IN EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

As the above example illustrates, humor can be used to motivate, to illustrate, to inspire, to enlighten, to stimulate, to simplify[9], to break the ice, to capture and recapture attention, to dispel fears and dislikes, to establish rapport, to make a point, to manage tension and anxiety, and to revive. Such elements have been perceived by students as effective and preferred modes of teaching.[10] Baughmann has identified seven functions humor serves in educational settings: these are as a social lubricant, as a safety valve, as

therapy, as a tonic, as a sixth sense, as a survival kit, and as motivation and cognitive challenge. [11] Each of these functions will be mentioned in this paper, which explores some ideas for using humor in creating a facilitative atmosphere, in getting and keeping students' attention, in teaching library skills and concepts, and in explaining policies and promoting services.

HUMOR IN ESTABLISHING CLASSROOM CLIMATE

Breivik found several elements that contribute to positive motivation in library instruction: making students feel liked, making students feel more self-sufficient, making students believe they can succeed, and making the material interesting and relevant. [12] All of these elements are contingent upon a comfortable, enabling classroom climate. It is up to us as teachers to create that kind of environment, and humor can help. "Humor is contagious! If the teacher enjoys what he or she is doing, it is more likely that the students will also enjoy the situation. Enthusiasm is the most convincing orator!" [13] When our attitude is positive, when we are friendly and congenial, we reaffirm to students that learning doesn't have to be dull and uninteresting. [14]

It has been my experience that the last things students anticipate from a library instruction session are fascinating content and a conviction that they can divide and conquer the library. Scholars and teachers speak of math anxiety and test anxiety, but library anxiety can be equally debilitating! These preconceived notions are precisely what make humor a perfect approach. Its surprise power is tremendous. Baughmann's image of humor as a "shock valve" applies here. It instantaneously releases pent-up anxiety and leaves the space empty for refilling with more positive, constructive emotions.

What emotions can fill this void? The kinds of emotions humor has been found to elicit are comfort, well-being, friendship, mutual trust, respect, and warmth, all of which are conducive to a leader/follower relationship. [15] If we think of teaching as "leaderly behavior" [16], it is easier for us to remind ourselves that we aren't just teaching library skills -- we are influencing perceptions and providing role models. The climate in which we conduct library instruction thus becomes much more than a motivational factor: it becomes part of the lesson. If students prefer to become more self-sufficient as researchers as Breivik suggests [17], then what we communicate about ourselves through our words and actions may influence students' future dealings with libraries and librarians. The attitude with which we approach the library is key. As Highet says, the real purpose of humor in teaching is to link students

and teachers through enjoyment [18]: "When a class and its teacher all laugh together, they cease for a time to be separated by individuality, authority, and age. They become a unit, feeling pleasure and enjoying the shared experience." [19] I, for one, hope that students I teach are better able to appreciate the wonders of the library and to deal more constructively and more perseveringly with some of its complexities as a result of observing me do the same.

Effective and interesting instruction is facilitated by rapport, two-way communication, the old give-and-take. [20] One major concern of all teachers is how to get students to ask questions or make comments which initiate dialogue. Asking questions yourself, incorporating discussions, telling students you expect them to interrupt, pausing for comments and questions, arranging chairs in a semi-circle, and reinforcing contributions are all common methods to increase interaction. [21] Humor has a very powerful way of combining verbal and nonverbal cues that say, "I'm open: let's chat. Pick my brain: I'm here to help." As Baughmann said, humor can be used as a "social lubricant". Humor is one of the signs teachers can use to provide information about themselves and to set a tenor of instruction. [22] Since instruction librarians frequently do not establish and maintain eye contact, do not involve the audience sufficiently, fail to speak loudly enough, take themselves too seriously, make sessions too ponderous, and do not allow for levity and

spontaneity [23], it would seem that carefully planning the delivery of an introductory anecdote could help the librarian as well as the student! To enhance humor's effect, the teacher can select the nature and object of her humor.

Of utmost importance is that the humor reflect the teacher [24] -- unnatural humor will be picked up by students, create a sense of falseness, and destroy your chances for sincere rapport. So one doesn't want to overdo humor or to use corny puns and one-liners. If it's not funny to you, it won't come across as funny to the students either, and honest interaction is endangered. Not only does one want to be judicious in how much humor one uses, but one also has to carefully consider who the joke will be on. Sarcastic or aggressive humor directed at students is normally not an effective means of getting attention and establishing rapport. In fact, it can alienate students. [25] But as an icebreaker for a particularly apathetic group, a subtle, light-hearted allusion to a student's seeming disinterest can, in some circumstances, prompt her to express her doubts and open the avenue for sincere interaction. Though one does not want to stress self-effacing comments, presenting oneself and/or the library in a humorous light can do wonders in eroding the status barrier between teacher and student [26]. For example, imagine asking students if they've ever had the following thoughts and feelings in connection with

libraries:

> A little suffering is good for the soul.
>
> Captain James T. Kirk
>
> Logic and practical information do not seem to apply here.
>
> Dr. Leonard McCoy
>
> Hours can be centuries.
>
> Vanna the Troglyte
>
> A library serves no purpose unless someone is using it.
>
> Atoz of Sarpeidon
>
> No problem is insoluble.
>
> Dr. Janet Wallace
>
> Knowledge, sir, should be free to all!
>
> Harry Mudd
>
> The more complex the mind, the greater the need for the simplicity of play.
>
> Captain James T. Kirk [27]
>
> Almost everything you need to know about a subject is in the encyclopedia. [28]

When students are told that all but the last of these comments came not from famous philosophers or researchers, but from various episodes of Star Trek, at least some of the TV generation should get a good chuckle.

Librarians constantly complain about insufficient time to teach library skills and about the difficulty in avoiding jargon. In its own way, humor can help us to keep a proper perspective on these issues. I am referring to inadvertant humor -- the humor we create without trying. A serious, truthful expression can be extraordinarily funny if the person for whom it is intended is

not from the "in" crowd or is not in the right mood. Take the following example from the readings I did to write this essay:

> It is suggested here that a joke or cartoon is found to be funny as a result of a two-stage process. In the first stage, the perceiver finds his expectations about the picture disconfirmed by the caption. In other words, the recipient encounters an incongruity - the punch line. In the second stage, the perceiver engages in a form of problem solving to find a cognitive rule which makes the punch line follow from the main part of the joke and reconciles the incongruous parts. [29]

I am quite sure the author had no intent other than to hypothesize about the psychological process involved in comprehending jokes and cartoons. Normally I am deeply committed to applying cognitive theory to library instruction. Yet in my frame of mind (I'd been pouring over humorous material all evening), this passage struck me as hilarious. Now picture a librarian spouting jargon and cramming in little bits of information about each reference book into an already packed agenda. From a neophyte user's point of view, this scene can appear quite ludicrous! I believe we inadvertantly cause a less than serious atmosphere in library instruction when we forget ourselves and rattle off lines of unintelligible gobbledygook and try to cover too much. By the end of the session, we must look like a movie that has switched from slow motion to fast

forward! Planning for an anecdote or two can force us to keep in mind all of the outcomes we want from our session rather than just the skill outcomes, thereby helping us to avoid the information overload we are so often guilty of perpetrating.[30] Displaying detailed knowledge, using complicated language, cutting off discussion, and using a formal demeanor all break down the two-way communication process by overemphasizing the "psychological size" of the teacher.[31] In this respect, humor can be a preventive medicine for teachers as well as an instructional strategy for learners!

DRAMA AND COMEDY IN THE CLASSROOM

Once we have students' attention, we have to maintain it if learning is to take place. Effective teaching has been found to include significant use of drama and the display of energy and enthusiasm.[32] Just as with acting, using a variety of verbal and nonverbal cues, employing a superb sense of timing, evoking the imagination, and responding to the audience all help to control mood and increase impact.[33]

> ... [A] teacher's verbal art shares the basic necessities of catching and holding a listener's attention, of providing emphasis and direction, and of leading up to the key moment and striking home.[34]

Comic relief has been found to help sustain concentration in the theater, and most probably it can do the same in education.[35] In classroom library instruction people are more or less forced, for a period of time, to collectively concentrate on a task. A break for laughter can revitalize the group and keep them on task.[36] "Humor can spark a lesson. It can help us and our students to become more alert."[37] Creating movement, using novelty, and varying intensity stimulate the senses to attend.[38] A well-placed one-liner, a mock reference interview, playful posters, and a library version of a quiz show can all fit this bill. Research has not yet confirmed exactly how or even whether the use of comic relief and related forms of humor actually increases academic performance.[39] Personally, I'm not waiting around to find out: part of the art of teaching is not waiting for the science of teaching to catch up when a good technique feels right.

The use of satire, caricature, and exaggeration are all good dramatic and comic techniques. Tongue-in-cheek fantasy can also stimulate the imagination and provide a unique perspective on the library. Witness the following quote as cited by Baughmann:

> A new aid to rapid - almost magical - learning has made its appearance. Indications are that if it catches on, all the electronic gadgets will be so much junk. The new device is known as Built-in-Orderly Organized Knowledge. The makers generally call it by its initials,

BOOK.

> Many advantages are claimed over the old-style learning and teaching aids on which most people are brought up nowadays. ... It is made entirely without mechanical parts to go wrong or need replacement.
> Anyone can use BOOK, even children, and it fits comfortably into the hands ...
>
> How does this revolutionary, unbelievably easy invention work? Basically BOOK consists only of large number of paper sheets. ... No buttons need to be pressed to move from one sheet to another, to open or close BOOK, or to start it working.
> ... Instantly it is ready to use ... The user may turn at will to any sheet, going backwards or forwards as he pleases ..." [40]

When one thinks of comedy, one normally thinks either of inadvertant bloopers and boners or of statements that are carefully constructed to be funny. However, perfectly serious statements can also be made humorous when they arrive unexpectedly. Adding laughter to a literal statement, it signals an ambiguity of intent and allows one to dilute (as with understatements), contradict (as with sarcasm) or totally change (as with word plays) the verbal message. [41] The ability to turn real life into an amusing scenario by simply and accurately reporting it is a subtle and well-appreciated form of humor. [42]

One of my colleagues and I recently held a two-hour talk on primary sources with twenty-five future social studies teachers. They were near graduation

and ready to enter the teaching force. We attempted to use a wide variety of topics, events, persons, and centuries in order to catch as many of their personal or instructional interests as we could. The array must have been impressive, because after the first hour, at the point when I used the debates on woman's suffrage to illustrate the *Congressional Record*, a young man asked how I came up with all these different examples. Quite taken aback by an education major's consideration of my instructional strategy (the inherent danger in teaching teachers!), the only response that occurred to me was the truth: "I thought to myself," I replied, " if I had just finished student teaching, was graduating in two weeks, just had this one last intensive course to finish, and had been sitting in class all day for a whole week, what would I find interesting?" The impact was tremendous! There were several outright laughs, and an immediate air of relaxation filled the room. I was reaffirming the atmosphere that we had created at the beginning of class. I was letting them know that I empathized with them, and better yet, that I cared enough to accommodate their feelings by making a potentially dry presentation relevant. I had, of course, exaggerated the truth for impact. But the young man knew I was not dismissing his question with humor. He knew my answer was an honest one when I looked directly at him and said: "As I'm sure you found in student teaching, preparation is often the hardest part of the lesson." We all

left that interchange with a smile and renewed vigor. For someone like myself, whose mind doesn't always think in puns and quips, the reminder that the truth, carefully phrased or captured, can be extraordinarily funny (witness political cartoons) was a reassuring one.

TEACHING SKILLS AND CONCEPTS EASILY AND PAINLESSLY

In the discussion of the rat's maze of library research, I said that humor can be used to simplify. Cartoons, anecdotes, riddles, limericks, and witty metaphors can solidify a complex set of concepts into a manageable, encapsulated entity. As Kelly says: "Material spiked with humor can make lessons easier to grasp." [43] He goes so far as to assert that humor may even make our minds think better. [44] Making the complex simple is what Baughman calls the "survival kit" function of humor. When the load gets heavy, we need protection against the weight. That's probably why people say, "Lighten up!"

If we are teaching by the search strategy or information structure/discipline growth modes, [45] the rat's maze discussed earlier, properly drawn of course, can support instruction. It provides what Robert Gagne calls an "advance organizer," [46] i.e. it is the succinct outline of the talk to follow, which can then be referred back to throughout the lecture. The

importance of reiterating where the instructor is in the overall scheme of the lecture at important transition points, and the importance of summarizing at the end of a lesson are well-documented in education. [47] In the information processing perspective on learning, attention and memory are the keystones of learning. (For all the theorists among you, may I point out the irony in using a behaviorist's image to support cognitive principles?) The concept of attention has already been addressed, but can humor actually enhance students' ability to remember information presented in lectures?

> A good visual can clarify the points being made and help to ensure that everyone is focusing on the same point at the same time. Good visuals can also help to highlight the organization of a presentation and to emphasize major points.
> Learning experiences that involve more than one sense have higher retention rates; e.g., other things being equal, if people see a diagram of a search strategy in addition to hearing about it, they will remember it longer. [48]

Our rat's maze is an image known to students to which they can tie the new information and thereby store it for future use. [49] Lorayne and Lucas have found that the more ridiculous the image created, the better the message is implanted.[50] Humorous metaphors and analogies make the abstract more concrete. They are more than fun: they facilitate students' attempts to learn library concepts they will later put into practice.

Subject headings, filing rules, index entries, print and nonprint formats, and material locations are all commonplace components of library instruction. If an instruction librarian wants to plan humor in her/his presentation, funny examples of these items are usually the first thing s/he considers. They are an excellent way to spice up a type of tool or title-by-title mode of presentation, because "every reference tool has an unusual arrangement, bizarre entries, or both." [51] Humorous examples have been found to enhance student interest [52] and in some cases to facilitate long-term retention of concepts. [53] I will never forget the following subject headings:

> Banana Research
> Harvard University -- Sanitary Affairs
> Hooking
> Sewage -- Collected Works
> Sneezeweed [54]

Now, let's face it, not only are filing rules and the like complex [55], but in many cases they are unnecessarily so. Sometimes they are obscure and inconvenient to users because of procedural ideosyncracies or budgetary necessity -- sometimes they're just plain thoughtless and inconsiderate. I believe we do students a disservice if we gloss over irregularities without mention, because we fail to prepare them for future library use in a realistic way. "Reality is often incongruous, situationally absurd. It is never logical for long. If it is to be understood, it must be experienced in all its frequently mocking

irrationalty, its contempt for logic and calculation." [56] Humor has a way of keying in on exactly the essence of these important digressions from the rule [57], and allows us to touch on these complexities and imperfections in passing without overwhelming students. [58] The ability of humor to make the road of life a little less bumpy is what Baughmann calls its "therapy" value.

One of the most difficult skills to teach even advanced students is how to evaluate an information source for authority, validity, thoroughness, and correctness. One aspect of evaluation that causes particular difficulty is understanding an author's legitimate and illegitimate use of statistics. The following quotes, as cited in Paulos, are obviously absurd violations of statistical logic to prove a point:

> 'Most automobile accidents occur close to home, so we can see that near one's home is the most dangerous place to drive.'
>
> 'Very few accidents occur when one is driving over 95 mph, so it's clear that driving this fast is actually quite safe.' [59]

These exaggerated arguments clarify the point about legitimate use, break the monotony, and wake students' brains up, because it takes a moment for the brain to figure out that illogic. By pointing out the extreme case, you can send the subconsious message to students that they are more than capable of the

thought processes needed to avoid these pitfalls. If you have taught them correctly, they will still realize that source evaluation and source use can be tricky; but they will consider them to be in the realm of achievable skills. Rather than dwelling on their own insecurities, these students can say to themselves, "Yes, I can do that. That's not so bad." In fact, this type of concept is one with which almost everyone has had experience, and allowing students a chance to relate these stories or to imagine other humorous examples can actively engage them in elaborating on the concept and can clarify their understanding of it. [60]

Have you ever tried to impart to students the essense of an annotated bibliography? It requires considerable depth of understanding to master the concept. Yet it can be depicted succinctly by a clever, almost slapstick example. I went to a conference recently at which a community college composition instructor spoke about his use of shapes, humor, fairy tales and nursery rhymes in his classroom. He provided one of the most clever examples of a book and a periodical article annotation I have ever seen:

Buckets, John. Jack and Jill. Hillside Publishing Co., 1454.

In this classic of upward mobility Buckets demonstrates the negative potential of the pursuit of drink and its deleterious effects on romantic involvement. An illustrative case history and concise expression have made this a classic. Many researchers, however, may find the limited sample size a drawback."

Speidermann, Susan. "Little Miss Muffet." Psychology Quarterly, 57:19-27, March, 1980.

This article demonstrates the intense paranoia, often taking the form of fear of arachnids, that can be triggered by excessive ingesting of lacteal substances. It firmly rejects the hypothesis that such paranoia is a symptom of anal contact with low stools. [61]

Such parodies are a fine means of providing the "motivation and cognitive challenge" Baughmann says humor can accomplish. While appealing to the child in us, understanding this nursery rhyme parody requires some mental juggling on the adult level. For beginning college students (and not overly serious adults), this strikes an idyllic, harmonious chord for learning.

THE POLICY PILL AND PROMOTIONAL PEP-TALK

We are often forced in the library instruction session to cover the

essentials of library policy. Check-out restrictions and hours of service are standard fare. In many cases, this information is not what students had hoped to hear. How does one get them to swallow the pill? Douse it with Baughmann's "tonic"! Humor can make this news more palatable. One need not give the impression that library policies are a joke: humor can help to illustrate the sense behind such policies. For example, in my readings, I ran across a passage I'd like to share with those of you who strictly enforce a "No eating or drinking" policy:

> Of the Enemies of Books I especially esteem the Cockroach. ... Some may question if the Nature of the Destruction wrought by this Pestilential Insect be of serious import, but I do earnestly Assure all such that I have witnessed with my own eyes appalling Injuries inflicted on the most Precious Books in my Custody, & these Injuries, I am convinc'd, were justly chargeable to this hardshelled Rogue who Scuttles about the Book Shelves, & owns no restraint upon his ungovernable Appetite.[62]

All of us know in the back of our minds that students don't take advantage of the reference desk and other library services as often as they should. Certainly they must need help, but they appear either to be unaware of the services or to prefer to do without them. How does one convey the wide variety of ways in which a library or a librarian can be of assistance? How does one get students to be more assertive about their information needs? Promote library services

with quips, quotes, comics, and skits! Humor is an excellent way to merge the affective and cognitive reactions which make up an appreciation for libraries. I would like to share three humorous ways in which to shed some light in the darkness.

First, turning students on to libraries by bombarding them with potentials is an exhilerating experience for all. I did this with a class of apathetic, would-be teachers who had no particular assignment to do, but whose professor was convinced they ought to know something about libraries. Far be it from me to argue that point! I didn't "teach" them anything (i.e. "how-to") -- I just hit them with a barrage of materials -- some weighty, some informative, some totally unexpected. I tried to anticipate their own interests as well as point out things they could use with their future students. I had NASA pictures from space, basal readers, directories for teaching overseas, ERIC documents, art encyclopedias, statistics on women in the labor force, collections of quotations, and I can't even remember what else. This example probably fits within a loose definition of humor -- a happy-go-lucky, show-and-tell that caused as many smiles as the best of comedy routines. I very much appreciated Lindgren's and Compton's expressions of the potential value of library instruction:

> As instruction librarians, we need to establish teachable broad concepts of the library, for example: that it contains not just information (as in 'information retrieval'), but also knowledge, data, ideas, opinions, stories, polemics, myths, wisdom, lies, facts, reports of research, memories, etc., and that all this immense variety is manifested in various formats. [63]

> I have observed fully the variety of postures towards libraries by a majority of students: ineptitude, indifference, fear, frustration, and, to be sure, hostility. ... Then, too, there have been those nourishing experiences in which such postures were fractured, when some students yielded to the lure of the riches I proffered via the library. [64]

Second, another tactic I used myself. In the two-hour session on primary sources for future teachers which I previously mentioned, my colleague and I were talking to young adults who were headed for a wide variety of school districts. We wanted to prepare them for urban, suburban, and very rural library settings, so part of our goal was to point out differences between such libraries. We gave the students a thought-provoking set of five questions at the beginning of the session, and allowed about ten minutes for discussion among themselves. One of the questions was: "You have just arrived in a fairly small town in West Texas to teach American and Texas history to junior high students. What do you expect from the local library?" As we anticipated, at least one student was heard uttering, "Nothing!" When my colleague came back

to that question at the relevant point in our presentation, she recounted the young man's response. A somewhat hushed embarrassment came over the room. My colleague then explained that it was a great answer -- certainly the safest, and at least he wouldn't be disappointed! She went on to say, of course, that that doesn't mean one shouldn't hope for and request more than "nothing". We had taken a risk. We set up a question to allow students to enter humor into the class. Our plan could have fallen flat, but it didn't. Having enough faith to take some risks is, to me, what inspired teaching is all about.

My third illustration is simply a listing of questions/requests at reference desks that you can recount to students. Not only will they open students' eyes to the range of possibilities, but they will also assure students that their question/request is probably not going to be considered the most trivial, unenlightened, or outrageous!

Requested: Homeless Idiot
Book wanted: *Homer's Iliad*

Requested: The Wooden Kid
Book wanted: *Pinocchio*

Requested: My Heart is Wounded. They Buried My Knee
Book wanted: *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*

The Asian population explosion evidently concerned a
befuddled better who phoned a Kansas library.
'We're having an argument,' he announced. 'Can Chinese
women have babies in three months instead of nine?'

> Small boy: "Do you have any books on how to raise pets?"
> Librarian: "Certainly. What kinds of pets?"
> Small boy: "Dinosaurs."
>
> A New York library tells of the time a man walked in, dropped some false teeth on the Circulation desk and asked if they could help identify the owner. [65]

One of my favorite quotes to use when discussing with students the necessity of considering what and how to ask at the reference desk is the following:

> 'Would you tell me please, which way I ought to go from here,' asked Alice.
> 'That depends a good deal on where you want to get to," said the Cat. [66]

HOW TO START USING HUMOR

Do you or does someone you know have HUMOR ANXIETY, that nagging, underlying conviction that you just aren't funny? Break that self-fulfilling prophesy cycle! Call Stuffy-Busters! If your colleagues, friends, or students never thought of themselves as Stuffy-Busters before, enlighten them. I can tell you from personal experience that they can do wonders recounting examples of your talent for making people smile and laugh. Be sure you specify

that you need examples of times you meant to be funny, though!

First, figure out what kinds of humor are comfortable for you and what kinds are appropriate for your situation.[67] Let's face it -- some of us just aren't the light-hearted, jovial, or clever types, and each of us should chose a style that fits our personality. When you are ready to dabble a little in the realm of humor, start small. Think back to some times on the reference desk when humor came naturally to you, build on those interactions, and ease them into group settings. You can use humor written by others. You can also start a file of humorous quips you've used or heard at home, at work, around town, or on the television.[68] I find that just psyching myself up for a fun time helps the humor brain muscles to warm up for action.

Be cautious, however, about the nature, amount, and intensity of the humor you use. We have already noted that humor directed at students in a negative way and self-effacing humor must be used judiciously and with discretion. For those starting out, it is easy to go overboard. "Canned jokes, inappropriate jokes, old jokes, corny jokes, not just bad jokes, are no funnier in the classroom than anywhere else. ... Probably the best general advice is to avoid telling 'jokes.'[69] If you turn the classroom into a stand-up comedy routine or a sideshow, it may offend serious students, it may be taken too lightly, or it may give the impression that your content is without substance.[70] Do not try

so hard that you forget your audience. I have seen attempts fall flat because they were too subtle or too sophisticated for the students.

> To force a sense of humor can be worse than revealing none at all. The best kind of humor is that which grows or develops naturally from a situation. If you want to enrich you use of humor, you need to try to develop a sense of spontaneity -- to be able to play off any situation that might develop in a flexible and comfortable manner. [71]

Remember, just relaxing the atmosphere in your classroom allows these situations to spring forth. It also will free students to produce the humor for you (an easily overlooked and underutilized resource). [72] As you begin to experiment, and as your successes show through in the smiling faces of students, I'm sure you'll find that humor will come naturally before long. The words of William Draves are reassuring: "Don't be afraid to use a joke if it is appropriate and not overdone. Even a poor joke will be recognized as a good try." [73]

HUMOR IS OUR SIXTH SENSE

I'd like to conclude with Dale Baughmann's elegant expression of the nature and value of humor in education.

What is humor? It is that soothing and compensating piece of the mind which prevents us from being overcome by life's adversities. Humor can dissipate the fog and make life more enjoyable and far less threatening. ...

Humor is our sixth sense - as important as any of the other five. It creates happiness, fosters friendship, cheers the discouraged, and dissolves tensions. And, as a bonus, it frees the mind, oils the squeaks and enables us to carry on with fewer dark hours. ... When a man is both scholarly and funny he is usually a most effective communicator.

You're not too dignified for rumor
And there's always time for humor.
You cannot wait for a brighter hour,
The time is now to use your humor power.[74]

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. My understanding of the term "one-shot lecture" corresponds to the following description:

   "This lecture, under whatever name, includes any length of presentation that is planned in advance and the object of which is to instruct students in the tools and techniques of library research. ... [It] does not imply that the librarian giving the presentation must do so alone and without any additional 'visual' support."

   Anne K. Beaubien, Sharon A. Hogan, and Mary W. George, Learning the Library : Concepts and Methods for Effective Bibliographic Instruction (New York and London : R.R. Bowker Company, 1982), p. 156.

2. Gilbert Highet, The Art of Teaching (New York : Vintage Books, 1958), pp. 56-57.

3. Barbara Schneider Fuhrmann and Anthony F. Grasha, A Practical Handbook for College Teachers (Boston, MA and Toronto : Little, Brown and Company, 1982), p. 86.

4. William A. Draves, How to Teach Adults (Manhattan, KN : Learning Resources Network, 1983), p. 8.

   Fuhrmann and Grasha, p. 51.

5. Beaubien, Hogan, and George, p. 157

   Patricia Senn Breivik, Planning the Library Instruction Program (Chicago : American Library Association, 1982), p. 55.

6. Examples of pitfalls that could be drawn into the maze are:
1) procrastinating and finding all your books checked out;
2) failing to narrow a topic and drowning in a pile of materials;
3) not finding out everything that belongs in a bibliography citation before identifying and using resources, resulting in an extra trip to the library to verify missing segments; and
4) using too many fact tools before using finding tools to find out what facts you need.

7. Breivik, p. 55.

8. William E. Kelly, Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Humor in Education But Were Afraid to Laugh (Bethesda, MD : ERIC Document Reproduction Service, ED 232 381, 1983) , p. 10.

9. Kelly, p. 3.

10. James H. Wandersee, "Humor as a Teaching Strategy," The American Biology Teacher 44 (April 1982): 213.

11. M. Dale Baughmann, Baughman's Handbook of Humor in Education. (West Nyack, NY : Parker Publishing Company, Inc., 1974) , pp. 55-58.

12. Breivik, pp. 54-55.

13. Kelly, p. 8.

14. Kelly, p. 15.

15. Virginia F. Ziegler and Gerald R. Boardman, "Humor: The Seventh Sense in Leadership," National Forum of Educational Administration and Supervision 2 (1985/86) : 13.

16. This philosophy was introduced to me by Dr. George A. Baker III, a professor in the Community College Leadership Program in the Department of Educational Administration at the University of Texas at Austin.

17. Breivik, p. 55

18. Highet, p. 55.

19. Highet, p. 56.

20. Fuhrmann and Grasha, p. 143.

    Anne F. Roberts, Library Instruction for Librarians (Littleton, CO : Libraries Unlimited, Inc., 1982) , p. 37.

21. Fuhrmann and Grasha, pp. 143, 146, 150.

22. Robert A. Stebbins, "The Role of Humour in Teaching: Strategy and Self-expression," in Teacher Strategies: Explorations in the Sociology of the School, ed. Peter Woods (London : Croom Helm, 1980) , p. 85.

23. Roberts, p. 33.

24. Kelly, pp. 4, 17.

25. Highet, p. 54.

    Ziegler and Boardman , p. 13.

26. Stebbins, p. 95.

27. All six of these quotations were taken from one book. The page numbers are listed in the order from which they were quoted.

    Susan Sackett, Fred Goldstein, and Stan Goldstein, Star Trek Speaks (New York : Pocket Books, 1979) , pp. 24, 56, 151, 152, 17, 16, 17.

28. Robert Benchley, "What College Did to Me," in Tales Out of School, ed. M. Jerry Weiss (New York : Dell Publishing Co., Inc., 1967) , p. 156.

29. Jeffrey H. Goldstein and Paul E. McGhee. The Psychology of Humor : Theoretical Perspectives and Empirical Issues (New York : Academic Press, 1972) , p. 82.

30. Breivik, p. 56.

    Beaubien, Hogan, and George , p. 189.

31. Fuhrmann and Grasha, p. 145.

32. Robert Norton. Communicator Style: Theory, Applications, and Measures (Beverly Hills, CA : Sage Publications, 1983) , p. 260.

33. Norton, pp. 145,260.

34. Kenneth E. Eble, The Craft of Teaching (San Francisco : Jossey-Bass, 1979) , p. 45.

35. Stebbins, p. 88.

36. Stebbins, p. 86.

37. Kelly, p. 9.

38. Fuhrmann and Grasha, p. 55.

39. Stebbins, p. 89.

40. The citation for this quotation is incomplete in my source. It indicates only that it came from the title, Quote.

    Baughmann, pp. 212-213.

41. Norton, p. 145.

42. Baughmann, pp. 24-25.

43. Kelly, p. 11.

44. Kelly, p. 11.

45. Beaubien, Hogan, and George, pp. 176, 180.

46. Fuhrmann and Grasha, p. 60.

47. Draves, p. 67.

    Fuhrmann and Grasha, p. 59.

    Roberts, p. 40.

48. Breivik, p. 78.

49. Fuhrmann and Grasha, pp. 59, 61.

50. Harry Lorayne and Jerry Lucas. The Memory Book (New York : Stein & Day, 1974) , p. 25.

51. Beaubien, Hogan, and George, p. 191.

52. Beaubien, Hogan, and George, p. 190.

53. Robert M. Kaplan and Gregory C. Pascoe, "Humorous Lectures and Humorous Examples : Some Effects Upon Comprehension," Journal of Educational Psychology 69 (February 1977) : 61, 64.

54. "Most Ridiculous Subject Heading Contest," The Unabashed Librarian 34 (1980) : 27.

55. Roberts, p. 31.

56. A.L. Bradford, "The Place of Humor in Teaching," Peabody Journal of Education 42 (1964) : 68.

57. Bradford, p. 68.

58. Eble, p. 38.

59. John Allen Paulos, I Think, Therefore I Laugh: An Alternative Approach to Philosophy (New York : Columbia University Press, 1985) , pp. 80-81.

60. Fuhrmann and Grasha, p. 62.

61. From a handout provided by Dr. Daniel Pukstas of Tompkins Cortland Community College at his presentation, "Shapes, Stories, and Smiles: Motivating Students to Learn Different Material" given at the 1985 National Conference on Teaching Excellence on May 24, 1985 in Austin, TX.

62. The Old Librarian's Almanack, reproduced in facsimile form in The History of a Hoax: Edmund Lester Pearson, John Cotton Dana, and 'The Old Librarian's Almanack' byWayne A. Wiegand. (Pittsburgh, PA : Beta Phi Mu, 1979) , p. 55.

63. Jon Lindgrin, "Seeking Useful Tradition in the College Library," in Progress in Educating the Library User, ed. John Lubans Jr. (New York : R.R. Bowker Company, 1978) , pp. 78-79.

64. Christopher Compton, "Innovation in Library Instruction Applied to an Adult Education Course," in Progress in Educating the Library User, ed. John Lubans, Jr. (New York: R.R. Bowker Company, 1978) , p. 133.

65. These reference questions are not attributed to any particular source. The page numbers below are listed in the order in which they are cited.

    Janice Glover, The Lighter Side of the Library (Taunton, MA : William S. Sullwold, Publishing, 1974) , pp. 54, 53, 51, 75, 42, 107.

    Other examples of unusual reference questions can be found in issues of The Unabashed Librarian.

66. Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass, quoted in Paulos, p. 146.

67. Wandersee, p. 217.

68. Baughmann, p. 76.

69. Eble, pp. 37-38.

70. Beaubien, Hogan, and George, p. 191.

71. Kelly, p. 12.

72. Baughmann, p. 76.

73. Draves, p. 20.

74. Baughmann, p. 52